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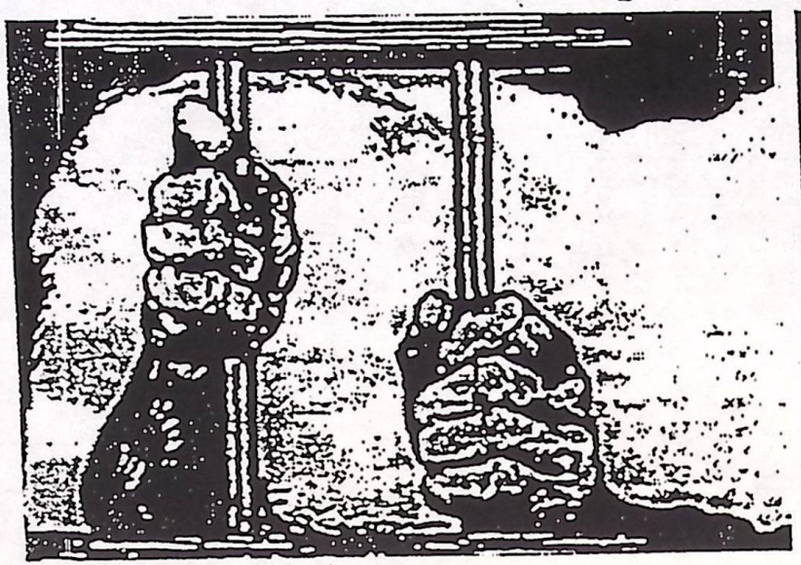
Brothers for Awareness
and
The History Club
Present



Politics of Prisons

Wednesday, April 19
7:00 pm
SC Rm. 203-5

A FREE Lecture/discussion addressing issues concerning the U.S. prison system:

*Political prisoners
*Management control units
*Economics of Criminal Justice

with Bonnie Kerness, prisoners' rights activist and Ramona Africa of MOVE
Introduction by Dr. Charely Flint, professor of Sociology/Criminal Justice

SGA Funded

Contact Derik at 595-9063 For Info/Flyers

The Beacon April 3, 1995

I'd like to provide a little background on myself for you. I began working in the Civil Rights movement over 30 years ago. For the last 18 years I have continued my work as a human rights activist in the prison movement, taking most of my direction from the prisoner activists themselves. I have seen enough pain and senseless cruelty to understand that it is an entire system which perpetuates crime. Poor folks aren't the cause of unemployment, poor educations, or criminal living conditions. I am going to talk about a couple of aspects of the politics of prisons, and Ramona will talk about others. Understand, though, that many more layers of the political uses of prisons, political uses of the courts and political uses of the police will be untouched.

In 1978, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young, stated that US prisons held "hundreds, maybe thousands of people I would categorize as political prisoners". The outcry from the government was deafening and Mr. Young was forced to retract his statement. Mr. Young was right. There was then, and there are now, political prisoners held in US prisons.

I'd like to offer a little background on prisons in general. The US imprisons over one and a half million people. That is a larger percentage than any other country in the world. Depending on geographic location, between 65 and 85% of those the US imprisons are people of color. On any given day, one out of four black males is under some form of social control which is a higher rate than happens in the formerly white supremacist country of South Africa. In other words, there is an apartheid in America that is worse than it ever was in South Africa. There are a lot of people making a lot of money off the business of caging primarily black and Latino primarily male bodies.

If you are a young, male of African decent in this country, if you are poor, should you get arrested your bail will be set so high you become an economic hostage. For you, the phrase, "innocent until proven guilty" has little meaning. You may sit in a cage for up to two years with without having been found guilty of anything. You will certainly not get a trial by a jury of your peers. You will be defended by a Public Defender who has a caseload so vast that you cannot possibly be treated as a priority, and finally you will serve a sentence which is 30% longer than a white would serve for the same crime. If you have seen this same thing happen to your father, your uncles, your cousins.... if you look around at the broader picture of what is happening to men, women, youth and children of your nationality, it is not hard to conclude that there is genocide being committed.

Historically, the US has experience in genocide with the original people of this land. When whites first came to the shores it's estimated there were between 10 and 100 million people living here in many great nations. Those natives were the first slaves and the first political prisoner s- and the first efforts at decimating an entire people though genocide.

The definition of genocide according to the United Nations is: a) the killing of members of a racial or religious group b) the causing of serious bodily harm to members of a

particular group c) deliberately inflicting on a group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group and e) forcibly transferring children of that group to another group.

If we use this definition, it is not hard to see how the mass imprisonment that is occurring fits that definition. Coupled with data on high infant mortality, early death of the elderly of color, lack of equitable medical treatment, opportunities and education that is afforded to whites - and the realization becomes more compelling. Many of those who are defined and perceived of as political prisoners grew up in a society that oppressed them just as surely as any totalitarian nation ever did. As part of that same generation, I know we also grew up being taught in school that each of us was free to dissent politically. So, in the 60's and 70's youth acted out this belief in a number of ways....native youth formed AIM, the American Indian Movement dedicated to the self determination of their people; Puerto Ricans joined the movement to free the island from US colonialism; white students formed the Students for a Democratic Society, other young whites worked in the South in the Civil Rights movement; - and the Black Panther Party was born. Many of us watched our peers being killed by government forces during that era, which led to the underground, offensive formation of the Black Liberation Army to stop the rash of killings of inner city youth by police.

The government, in response to this massive outcry against social inequities, developed a Counter Intelligence Program called COINTELPRO, which had as its objective the crippling of the Black Panther party and other radical forces. Over the years that this directive was carried out, those participating in the Black Panther Party were indeed targeted for imprisonment and assassination. Many of those young people who weren't murdered during that time were put in prisons across the country - and many, now in their 40's and 50's are still there 20 years later. In short, we find that during the past three decades there has been a steady increase in the number of people being imprisoned because of their political views and actions.

While the US continues to deny to the world that there are political prisoner within its borders, there is no way to work with prisoners for any length of time without hearing repeatedly of the existence of such people - and the treatment they are singled out for once in prison. Across the nation, we have seen the growing use of sensory deprivation/isolation units for such people and it is this "special" treatment which human rights advocates feel a growing concern about. These units are an outgrowth of behavior modification theory and are part of a systematic effort to destroy any visible signs of political resistence. The units, called Control Units, are designed to break the minds of the men and women caged there. If any of you have seen the PBS special called "Through The Wire", you will be familiar with the torture of Susan Rosenberg. Alejandrina Torres and Silvia Baraldini....and we have hundreds of other documented cases.

You can see the banner which has pictures of some of the men kept in New Jersey's Mangement Control Unit. In New Jersey, consistent with prisons in Ohio and across the country, if you Afrikanize your name, if you were involved in any progressive political or militarily defensive groups or actions, if you are a Muslim, a Black Panther, a member of the Black Liberation Army, or believe in independence for Puerto Rico or autonomy for the First Nations- in other words, if you exhibit ANY consciousness of genocide or oppression of people - you may be singled out for solitary confinement. You don't have to commit any institutional infration at all. This is not a punishment. You are placed there simply for who you are and for what you believe. The Warden of Marion Penitentiary (which was the first control unit prison) has been openly quoted as saying that the purpose of the control unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and society at large.

Picture the method this country uses to accomplish this. You are placed in a cage in a human warehouse where you will eat, sleep, exercise, wash, read, think and take care of bodily functions. You are there 24 hours a day, day in and day out, year in and year out with no end. The prisoners say that the silence is eerie. There is a steel door between you and the rest of the world. You may allowd out once every 46 hours for an hour and a half in a concrete yard, You may be allowed a 15 minute telephone call a day (in some cases one 15 minute call a month) and the call is monitored. Your mail is censored. If, for some reason, you have to leave your cell, you are strip searched, which often includes a humiliating anal probe. You are shackled around your waist and handcuffed. You are entirely under the control of mostly white supremacist prison guards who carry long, black clubs they refer to as "nigger beaters". They have made their hatred of you and your beliefs abundantly clear. You remain constantly on the alert for your own mental and physical deterioration.

I'd like to pause to show a five minute video which appeared on a New Jersey channel in March. It's a basically shallow piece, yet it is still a triumph because we got SOMEBODY to listen to what we are saying....in it, you see three of the prisoners with whom I work closely.....Ojore Lutalo is a New Afriken Anarchist whose case has been publicized widely in national and intenational anarchist publications. Daud Tulam is a Black Nationalist, and Dharuba Roberts participates in the New Afikan Independence Movement.....

Show Video - When Ojore says he isn't a prison rebel, it's because he knows that one cannot overthrow or undermine a repressive regime from the confines of a prison cage. They consider themselves at war with the US, and believe that the front is out here and not in there. For the most part, those prisoners who have embraced the rebellious behavior and the attitude of the prison rebel have vacillated upon release or shortly thereafter. Their projected committment was never intended to extend beyond prison walls. I can bear witness to what Ojore is saying. I've seen many prison rebels come out and disappear from the from that struggle.

It is important to understand that there are three forms of isolation in prisons. There is protective custody, which either the prisoner or the administration can request to protect someone who may, for instance, have their life threatened. Then there is administrative segregation where prisoners are placed after being found guilty of a real or imagined infraction. Neither of these is a control unit. A control unit is where a person is placed for no known reason for a purely administrative decision.

Some of the people inhabiting these Control Units across the country, then are our political prisoners. These units also contain social prisoners who have become politicized during the course of their imprisonment. The treatment and surveillance they endure is worse than inhumane, it is physical and mental torture. If we dig deeper into the existence of such practices, the political function they serve is inescapable. Police, the courts and the prison system all serve as social control mechanisms. The police are seen as the occupation army of the inner city. As the Rap group NWA says, they have the authority to kill the minority. And they do. Despite what we've been taught in the schools in this country, it seems that freedom of speech is only what is government approved. For political dissidents who are doing and saying things that the government disapproves of, there is no freedom of speech. The haunting truth is that no matter what you do to a Sundiata Acoli, an Ojore Lutalo or a Dhoruba Bin Wahad - even if the government succeeds in killing them - their ideas won't die. Those ideas won't die because they are born of their experience of living in this country, which has been the experience of the oppressed here across the centuries. If you don't know who George and Jonathan Jackson are, who Geronomo Pratt or Mumia Abu Jamal is, then you should find out. They are as much a part of American history as anyone else you've read about in your books.

Prisons reflect both the structure of society and the nature of the struggle against that structure. Many of the men and women that I've had the privilege to meet that constitute political prisoners in the US are visionaries for a more just, humane and non-racist society. The government has attempted to build a wall of silence around them and those of us who speak out on their behalf also come under government surveillance....Rafael Cancel Miranda, who was a Puerto Rican political prisoner for 25 years tells us that it's not enough to just feel bad or sad. We must DO something. Which is one of the reasons I am here today. I can no more stifle my awareness than any of the men pictured on the banner can stifle their beliefs.

The overall situation in the country in terms of the growth of control units, the conditions in them and the number of people being caged in isolation is worsening. This is happening at the same time that I am observing rumblings of a new level of activism and I think that the organizers of this event on campus are a visible part of this activism. There was a man in Nazi Germany named Pastor Martin Niemoller, who wrote the following:

"In Germany, they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't

Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was to speak up." Unfortunately the act of speaking out results in many of us being placed under surveillance by the government. My best consolation is that I am keeping company with people of principles whom I deeply respect.

Right now there are a number of things going on around the country which are related to the issues I've been talking about. A new control unit prison has opened in Florence, Colorado which houses 400 people in complete sensory deprivation. The government is telling folks that it is for 400 of the most "predatory" people in the federal prison system, which isn't true. A good portion of that massive concrete prison will be used to try to build that wall of silence around political dissidents. We also have litigation around control unit issues going on in several places in the country. In New Jersey there are two cases being litigated: one is based on how one is chosen for control unit placement. The prisoners are saying that it is obvious that it is based on race as well as politics. For instance, known white supremacists are NOT placed in control units there. There is also ongoing litigation about the censorship of Afro-centric cultural and political materials which are being withheld frompeople in the control units. The other relevant thing that going on is our attempt to build a nation-wide project which will gather data on exactly how many control units there are, who is in them, what the conditions are, etc.

Ramona is going to focus on the politics of the death penalty in telling you sabout the case of Mumia Abu Jamal, and the politics of the police in describing the bombing of the MOVE commune in 1985. One of the things that was so totally shocking about that bombing was the deafening silence of both the black and white communities afterwards. In New Jersey, it was the prisoners from Trenton State Prison who organized to make financial contributions and not the "free" community. That lack of outrage and outcry continues today in the sheep-like acceptance of warehousing over a million mostly people of color, in the same acceptance of police murder of our teenage children of color, in the acceptance that Mumia Abu Jamal is sitting on death row to be executed this year.

One of the things that both Ramona and I are working on is the development of a human resources bank which will help direct volunteers to where they are needed most. I'd like to close with a poem written by Assata Shakur. Assata was a political prisoner who has been granted political asylum in Cuba where she is currently living with her daughter.

The Preface: A DEDICATION by Assata Shakur

"NO ONE CAN STOP THE RAIN"
(Suggested title)

Watch, the grass is growing.
Watch, but don't make it obvious.
Let your eyes roam casually, but watch!
In any prison yard, you can see it, - growing.
In the cracks, in the crevices, between the steel and the concrete, out of the dead gray dust, the bravest blades of grass shoot up, bold and full of life.
Watch, the grass is growing. It is growing through the cracks.
The guards say grass is against the Law.
Grass is contraband in prison.
The guards say that the grass is insolent.
It is uppity grass, radical grass, runaway grass, militant grass, terrorist grass, they call it weeds.
Nasty weeds, nigga weeds, dirty spic, savage indian, wetback, pinko, commie weeds, - subversive!
And so the guards try to wipe out the grass.
They yank it from its roots.
They poison it with drugs.
They maul it.
They rake it.
Blades of grass have been found hanging in cells, covered with bruises, "apparent suicides."
The guards say that the "GRASS IS UNAUTHORIZED."
"DO NOT LET THE GRASS GROW."
You can spy on the grass.
You can lock up the grass.
You can mow it down, temporarily.
But you will never keep it from growing.
Watch, the grass is beautiful.
The guards try to mow it down, but it keeps on growing.
The grass grows into a poem.
The grass grows into a song.
The grass paints itself across the canvas of life.
And the picture is clear, and the lyrics are true, and haunting voices sing so sweet and strong, that the people hear the grass from far away.
And people start to dance, and the people start to sing, and the song is freedom.
Watch!, the grass is growing.

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Retyped: (09/09/91)

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